Guthrie wins Dakar stage five, Lategan stays top

HAIL: Toyota's Henk Lategan retained the overall lead in the Dakar Rally on Thursday after American Mitch Guthrie Jr led a fifth stage one-two-three for Ford in the Saudi Arabian desert.

South African Lategan, last year's overall runner-up, was 17th in the 371km stage from the Al-Ula bivouac to Hail with Qatari rival Nasser Al-Attiyah 16th for Dacia to close the gap to three minutes and 17 seconds.

"It was really, really, really difficult, one of the most difficult stages Ive had to open," said Lategan. "There were no bike tracks and a lot of the tracks were really, really small tracks. The rain washed a lot of them away."

Sweden's Mattias Ekstrom remained third for Ford, five minutes and 38 seconds off the lead.

The stage win was Guthrie's second of the event after Tuesday's success, making him the first driver to win more than once this year, and came after he finished four seconds behind team-mate Nani Roma. The Spaniard then dropped to second after collecting a one minute penalty for speeding.

Czech driver Martin Prokop was third on the stage in a non-factory Ford Raptor.

Ford had four cars in the top six overall, with Roma fourth ahead of Spain's four-time winner Carlos Sainz in fifth and Guthrie sixth.

In the motorcycle category, Argentine rider Luciano Benavides won the 356km stage on a KTM and moved up to third overall with defending champion and teammate Daniel Sanders finishing third to retake the lead from American Ricky Brabec.

The Australian is now two minutes and two seconds clear of Honda's Brabec.

"It was really important to not destroy the tyres... so I just took it easy in the middle part and just got through to the end, really," said Sanders.

"I'm just happy to not lose too much time and manage the situation because it could have ended the race today."

Spaniard Tosha Schareina, the overnight leader for the factory Honda team, dropped to fourth after collecting a 10-minute penalty for failing to depart the bivouac between marker flags.—Reuters

CAMELS scamper away as Toyota Gazoo Racing W2rc's South African driver Henk Lategan and compatriot co-pilot Brett Cummings compete during the fifth stage of the Dakar Rally, between Al-Ula and Hail, on Thursday.—AFP

Varma out for three weeks after surgery

NEW DELHI: Indian batter Tilak Varma will be out for nearly three weeks after undergoing surgery for a groin issue, the Indian cricket board (BCCI) said on Thursday.

Varma has been ruled out of the first three Twenty20 matches against New Zealand between Jan 21 and 25 after he had surgery on Wednesday, exactly a month before India's opening match in the ICC T20 World Cup.

"He was discharged from the hospital on Thursday morning and is scheduled to fly back to Hyderabad on Friday. He is currently stable and progressing well," the BCCI said in a statement.

Varma, 23, has played 40 T20 matches for India, and scored two fifties in his last three matches in the format.

His return for the final two T20s in the five-match series against visitors New Zealand, scheduled for Jan 28 and 31, will depend on his progress, the BCCI added.—Reuters

Sialkot, Hyderabad confirmed as new PSL franchises as auction fetches Rs3.6bn

By Kashif Abbasi

ISLAMABAD: Sialkot and Hyderabad are set to feature in the 11th edition of the Pakistan Super League (PSL) later this year after the cities were picked as the two new franchises of the league for a combined Rs3.6billion in a keenly contested auction here at the Jinnah Convention Centre on Thursday.

Real estate company OZ Developers secured the Sialkot franchise with a record bid of Rs1.85 billion per annum, while US-based FKS Group acquired the Hyderabad team for Rs1.75 billion per annum.

The rights for both franchises were sold for a 10-year period, meaning the Pakistan Cricket Board (PCB) will receive a total of Rs36 billion from the two new owners.

With these additions, the PSL will expand to eight teams for its 11th edition, scheduled from March 26 to May 3. The existing six franchises are Lahore Qalandars, Islamabad United, Peshawar Zalmi, Quetta Gladiators, Karachi Kings and Multan Sultans.

The auction, moderated by legendary former fast bowler Wasim Akram alongside PSL CEO Salman Naseer, drew considerable interest from overseas investors.

Hamza Majeed of OZ Developers, a Punjabi settled in Australia, chose Sialkot as the team's base, citing his regional roots. Fawad Sarwar of FKS Group, a US-Pakistani originally from Hyderabad and settled in the United States for 26 years, selected the city of his birth.

Flanked by the successful bidders, US Charg d'Affaires ad interim Natalie A. Baker, PCB chief operating Officer Sumair Ahmad Syed and Lahore Qalandars owner Atif Rana, PCB chairman Mohsin Naqvi described the event as a "big day" for Pakistan and its cricket.

"This is a success of Pakistan and its cricket," Mohsin said, highlighting the participation of overseas Pakistanis following the recent successful privatisation of Pakistan International Airlines.

He noted the strong interest from US-based companies, terming it a sign of growing investor confidence in the country.

"HBL PSL New Teams Auction has been nothing short of spectacular – record-breaking bids, passionate investors, and two incredible new franchises joining our family," he posted on X later. "FKS Group takes Hyderabad for PKR 17.5 billion, OZ Developers claim Sialkot for PKR 18.5 billion – a breathtaking PKR 36 billion over 10 years!"

This is love, belief, and pure emotion flooding into our game. Hyderabad & Sialkot – welcome home.

Other qualified bidders included Aim Next Inc, Deharki Sugar Mills, Inverex Solar, i2c, Jazz, Prism Developers, VGO Tel and Walee Pakistan.

Former Multan Sultans owner Ali Tareen's group had initially shown interest but withdrew from the auction.

"Our time with Multan Sultans was never just about owning a cricket team. It was about south Punjab," Tareen wrote in a post on X. "[It was] about giving a voice to a region that had been overlooked for too long. That's what drove everything we built."

Tareen added that if he were to return to the league, it would have to be for the same reason, stating that south Punjab "is where my heart is".

The Sultans, currently without an owner after the PCB declined to renew Tareen's contract, will be managed directly by the board for the upcoming season.

Mohsin explained that auctioning the Sultans alongside the new teams was considered but deferred due to time constraints, adding that it would be put up for sale before the next edition.

Ahead of the bidding, Mohsin awarded Rs90 million to the Pakistan team that won the Emerging Asia Cup and Rs18.5 million to the side that clinched the Hong Kong Sixes title.

The bidding deadline had been extended multiple times — from December 15 to 22 and then to 24 — following promotional roadshows in London and New York that attracted interest from Europe, the US and the Middle East.

The potential cities for the new franchises were Faisalabad, Gilgit, Hyderabad, Muzaffarabad, Rawalpindi and Sialkot.

The new owners expressed delight at fulfilling a long-held dream and thanked the PCB for its support during the process. Mohsin praised the board's efforts in organising roadshows that contributed to the historic outcome.

KARACHI: Egypt's Aly Abou Eleinen in action during the Karachi Open quarter-final against Marwan ElShorbagy of England at the DA Creek Club on Thursday.—Courtesy PSA

Eleinen stuns ElShorbagy to reach semis

KARACHI: Egypt's Aly Abou Eleinen threw open the bottom half of the draw at the Karachi Open, featuring Pakistan's last standing hope Noor Zaman, when he stunned second-seed Marwan ElShorbagy in straight games to seal a spot in the semi-finals on Thursday.

Eleinen, ranked 14th in the world, dominated a one-sided encounter at the DA Creek Club as he raced to a 11-7, 11-1, 11-9 victory and will face the winner of the quarter-final tie between world under-23 champion Noor and fourth seed Mohamad ElShorbagy for a spot in the final.

After edging a high-quality first game by asserting himself in the closing exchanges, Eleinen continued to build momentum as the match progressed, dictating a one-sided second game to the loss of a single point.

Despite an ElShorbagy resurgence early on in the third game, Eleinen once again raised his level to pull away from 7-7 to seal a thoroughly deserved victory after 41 minutes of play.

"In my preparation for the match, I just wanted to focus on me," he said. "The whole season, I have just tried to focus on myself, and if I can do this against Marwan, it's a good sign because he's such a good player."

Former world number one Karim Abdel Gawad, the top seed, is on the other side of the draw and needed 50 minutes to end the challenge of Malaysia's Eain Yow Ng 11-3, 11-8, 16-14 and reach the semi-finals.

Egypt's Gawad will face the winner of Friday's quarter-final between compatriot Mohamad Zakaria and Alex Lau of Hong Kong.

On the women's side, Egyptian top seed Amina Orfi set up a semi-final clash against fourth-seeded compatriot Nada Abbas after both won their last-eight matches.

Orfi battled past Malaysia's Aira Azman 12-10, 11-8, 5-11, 11-8, managing to overturn a 7-2 deficit in the first game before running away with the fourth after it was tied at 8-8.

Nada prevailed in a see-saw all-Egyptian encounter with fifth seed Farida Mohamed 11-4, 9-11, 11-6, 0-11, 11-9 with the latter having injured her shoulder while having a 6-3 lead in the decisive fifth game.—Sports Reporter

ECB launches immediate review into debacle

SYDNEY: The England and Wales Cricket Board said it had launched an immediate and "thorough" review following the tourists' defeat in the fifth and final Ashes Test on Thursday.

England's preparations, coaching and off-field behaviour all came under the microscope during a demoralising series in Australia which they lost 4-1.

As soon as the series was over, ECB chief executive Richard Gould released a statement calling the team's failure to regain the Ashes "deeply disappointing".

Gould said there were "moments of strong performance and resilience", notably victory in the fourth Test in Melbourne, which saved England from a humiliating series whitewash.

But he said: "We were not consistent enough across all conditions and phases of the contest and Australia ultimately deserved to retain the Ashes.

"We will take many lessons from this tour and are determined to improve quickly. Our focus is on regaining the Ashes in 2027.

"A thorough review of the campaign is already under way.

"This will cover tour planning and preparation, individual performance and behaviours, and our ability to adapt and respond effectively as circumstances require."

While captain Ben Stokes appears safe from the axe, the roles of head of cricket Rob Key and coach Brendon McCullum are set to come under the microscope.

British media, including the BBC, have reported that Key and McCullum are likely to survive to show they can make improvements to the England set-up.

"We will implement the necessary changes over the coming months," Gould added.

Stokes vowed to stay on as England captain and backed McCullum.

"I'm definitely, keen as anything to carry on," the 34-year-old all-rounder told reporters. "I love having a challenge thrown at me and at the moment the challenge is getting the team back to where we once were in terms of the performances that we were delivering."

Asked about McCullum's position, Stokes gave his full backing to the New Zealander, who has a contract until after the 2027 home series against the Australians and said he expected him to remain in his role.

"I do expect him to be [in charge] but again it's not my decision," he said. "I'm sure if it ever ... comes to it, I'll be asked my opinion and he'll be getting my full support and backing.

"I absolutely love working with Baz. He's a great man and he's a very, very good coach. You know there's more that goes on behind the scenes than he'll ever give away and than he'll ever let out."

England's next Test assignment is not until June, at home to New Zealand. Coming up fast is the T20 World Cup in India and Sri Lanka next month when McCullum will expect to be in charge of the squad, which will be captained by Harry Brook.—Agencies

Australia get over the line in Sydney for 4-1 Ashes triumph

SYDNEY: Australia had a few nervous moments but safely chased down their 160-run victory target before tea on the final day of the fifth Ashes Test against England on Thursday for a five-wicket victory and a 4-1 series triumph.

Seamer Josh Tongue led England's battling rearguard with 3-42 but Alex Carey got Australia across the line with a four through the covers in mid-afternoon in the company of Cameron Green.

"We've played so well as a team," said Steve Smith, who was standing in for Pat Cummins as Australia captain for the fourth time in the series.

"We've had some incredible individual performances but ... everyone else just stood up at different moments. I think that's what makes a really good team. We won those big moments throughout the series."

England will take credit for making a game of it and not being ground into the Sydney dirt as previous tourists have in end-of-series dead rubbers at the famous old ground.

Without the bowling of injured captain Ben Stokes, however, defending 160 was always going to be an uphill challenge on a good wicket which allowed day-five action for the second time in the series.

Australia's openers managed to get the target under 100 runs before Man of the Match Travis Head, whose third century of the series underpinned his team's first-innings 567, ballooned a shot to midwicket off Tongue for 29.

Jake Weatherald followed for 34, again caught off Tongue's bowling, to bring up lunch with Australia 89 runs from their goal.

It was 15 years and a day since England won the final Test of the 2010-11 series at the same ground by an innings and 83 runs — the last time they won an Ashes series Down Under.

Usman Khawaja made his debut in that match and got his chance for one final innings before retirement when Smith was bowled through the gate by the spin of Will Jacks for 12 soon after lunch.

The England players formed a cordon to welcome Khawaja to the crease but Tongue's bowling was less friendly and the left-hander played on for six after facing seven balls.

"I was trying to act cool, but the whole Test match I found it really hard to control my emotions," the 39-year-old admitted.

Labuschagne had been dropped on 20 off Tongue when Bethell failed to hold onto the ball despite an acrobatic leap at backward point.

He was unable to make the most of his reprieve, however, running himself out for 37 with 39 runs still required for victory.

Carey, who made 16 not out, and Green, who finished unbeaten on 22, nearly reprised Labuschagne's exit with a classic mix-up after an overthrow but eventually made their ground to secure the victory.

"It's a tough one to take knowing that we can play better than that," said Stokes, who exhorted his players from the slips on Thursday.

"But I've got to give full credit to (Australia), they've been just incredible for five Test matches."

England had resumed on 302-8 but Mitchell Starc struck a major blow to their hopes of setting Australia a testing target when he had Bethell caught behind for 154.

Bethell's superb maiden Test century offered plenty of promise for the future and was essentially the difference between an innings defeat for England and Australia batting again.

Starc (3-72) returned to remove Tongue for six to end the innings on 342, the left-arm quick later awarded Player of the Series honours for his tally of 31 wickets over the five tests.

"The body is still holding together and this is a great group to be a part of," the 35-year-old said. "I am a little tired but got the job done."

In Sydney, Australia were again that bit superior in every department, as they were when wins in Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide secured possession of the Ashes urn for another 18 months in just 11 days.

England won a lottery of a fourth Test in Melbourne — their first win in Australia since Sydney in 2011 — but the future of the "Bazball" style of play must be in doubt after a tour that started with high hopes ended in a 4-1 loss.

"We've not won the big series that we want to be winning," said Stokes. "When a trend is happening on a consistent basis ... that's when you do need to go back and look at the drawing board and make some adjustments."

Despite England's woes, the Ashes remain as popular as ever with the 211,032 fans through the gates over the five days in Sydney, the most ever for a Test match at the ground.—Reuters

AUSTRALIA'S Steve Smith takes a selfie with skipper Pat Cummins and team-mates as they celebrate with the trophy after the Ashes series at the Sydney Cricket Ground on Thursday.—Reuters

Scoreboard

ENGLAND (1st Innings) 384 (J. Root 160, H. Brook 84; M. Neser 4-60)
AUSTRALIA (1st Innings) 567 (T. Head 163, S. Smith 138; J. Tongue 3-97, B. Carse 3-130)
ENGLAND (2nd Innings, overnight 302-8):
Z. Crawley lbw Starc ... 1
B. Duckett b Neser ... 42
J. Bethell c Carey b Starc ... 154
J. Root lbw Boland ... 6
H. Brook lbw Webster ... 42
W. Jacks c Green b Webster ... 0
J. Smith run out ... 26
B. Stokes c Smith b Webster ... 1
B. Carse c Smith b Boland ... 16
M. Potts not out ... 18
J. Tongue c Labuschagne b Starc ... 6
EXTRAS (B-9, LB-11, NB-2, PEN-5, W-3) ... 30
TOTAL (all out, 88.2 overs) ... 342
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-4 (Crawley), 2-85 (Duckett), 3-117 (Root), 4-219 (Brook), 5-219 (Jacks), 6-264 (Smith), 7-267 (Stokes), 8-297 (Carse), 9-328 (Bethell)
BOWLING: Starc 18.2-2-72-3; Boland 25-6-46-2; Neser 16-0-55-1 (1nb); Green 6-0-40-0; Webster 16-1-64-3 (1nb); Head 4-0-25-0 (1w); Labuschagne 3-0-15-0 (2w)
AUSTRALIA (2nd Innings):
T. Head c Carse b Tongue ... 29
J. Weatherald c Potts b Tongue ... 34
M. Labuschagne run out ... 37
S. Smith b Jacks ... 12
U. Khawaja b Tongue ... 6
A. Carey not out ... 16
C. Green not out ... 22
EXTRAS (B-3, LB-1, W-1) ... 5
TOTAL (for five wickets, 31.2 overs) ... 161
FALL OF WICKETS: 1-62 (Head), 2-71 (Weatherald), 3-92 (Smith), 4-119 (Khawaja), 5-121 (Labuschagne)
DID NOT BAT: B. Webster, M. Neser, M. Starc, S. Boland
BOWLING: Carse 8-0-51-0 (1w); Tongue 11-0-42-3; Bethell 3-0-16-0; Jacks 6.2-1-42-1; Root 3-1-6-0
RESULT: Australia won by five wickets.
MAN-OF-THE-MATCH: Travis Head
SERIES: Australia won five-match series 4-1.
MAN-OF-THE-SERIES: Mitchell Starc